

2007 Emergency Supplemental Funding Request Confuses 'Need to Have' with 'Nice to Have'

By Neil Abercrombie

The Bush Administration has asked Congress to approve \$93.4 billion in emergency funding for Iraq and Afghanistan for the rest of 2007 and another \$141.7 billion for next year. This is on top of a proposed 2008 defense budget of \$481.4 billion.

Please note that the two supplemental appropriations requests are termed “emergency,” which ought to mean unexpected or unpredictable costs. But the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have been funded through emergency spending requests since they began. You might think someone in the Pentagon or the White House Office of Management Budget could project costs for a year. Apparently not.

Why is a supplemental request the budget vehicle of choice? As an emergency measure, it doesn't count against the budget ceiling that Congress adopts to guide spending, and therefore isn't figured into government estimates of our annual budget deficit. So, for the last four years, these emergency spending bills have helped President Bush obscure the true cost of the war.

As “emergency” legislation, these supplemental requests don't get the same scrutiny as regular annual appropriation bills. In fact, for the last five years, there's been heavy pressure from the Administration and the Republican majority in Congress to approve them quickly and without argument. Those who have opposed, or even questioned, any part have been accused of “not supporting our troops.”

The Bush Administration is already saying that if it doesn't get everything it wants — or if Congress adds requirements for troop readiness or demands for protective equipment — our men and women in combat will run out of bullets or be left stranded in the desert.

Baloney. Our first priority in Congress is supporting the troops. But supporting them means, among other things, covering their basic equipment needs in annual defense authorization and appropriation bills. Supplemental budgets are intended to pay the additional costs of operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, such as the \$5-\$6 billion we're told the president's “surge” in Iraq will cost.

The administration is misusing emergency budget requests in another way: The bills contain much more than war-related items — \$14 billion are requested for new armored vehicles, including 58 M-1 Abrams tanks, 168 Bradley Fighting Vehicles, 111 Stryker light armored vehicles, 121 M113 armored personnel carriers and 22 M88 recovery vehicles.

If these were all replacements for vehicles damaged or worn out in combat, they would belong in an emergency spending bill. The Army does need more of this equipment, and the administration and Congress will have to commit the billions of dollars needed to rebuild the force. But this request goes far beyond replacing combat losses.

Some of the so-called emergency replacement items in the 2007 request won't even be available until 2010 or later. We've been asked to replace two \$20-million fighter aircraft with \$200-million Joint Strike Fighters, which are still in development.

At the same time, the emergency request skimps on equipment badly needed by troops being deployed to Iraq as part of the surge. Why was Congress told that the Army can't even meet the basic needs for these Iraq-bound units?

Millions and millions of dollars are included in supplemental appropriations requests that should be spelled out, prioritized and justified through the regular congressional authorization and appropriation processes. Instead, they are hidden behind an emergency label.

The Democratic leaders of the House and the relevant committees and subcommittees are working to end this practice. We believe that every supplemental request should be "scrubbed;" that funding for anything that is not for a genuine emergency or an unforeseeable expenditure should be part of the annual Defense Authorization and Defense Appropriation bills.

Under the Constitution, Congress has the responsibility to make judgments about the nation's spending priorities and to oversee that spending. Those responsibilities can be best met when all foreseeable Pentagon spending is presented in the annual Defense budget, not tucked into must-pass, usually-rushed emergency spending bills.

We all know that maintaining a strong national defense is not cheap. Conducting wars in Iraq and Afghanistan is not cheap. But these costs should not be hidden, minimized, obscured, or embellished.

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